

Can You Hear Me Now? by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Acts 2:1-8, 12-21 June 12, 2011

How many of you have heard the cell phone commercials where the man says, "Can you hear me now?" It's been a very effective commercial campaign for Verizon Wireless and for good or for ill, that's the phrase that popped into my head as I read today's scripture.

That commercial along with the campaign by the United Church of Christ entitled "God is still speaking," were both rattling around in my head as I prepared for today's sermon.

"God is still speaking" and "Can you hear me now" could be the title of our devotional group that meets on Sunday mornings. Its design is to help all who participate to improve their hearing, to improve their ability to hear God's voice in an often cacophonous world.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. In Acts, chapter 2 God sends the Holy Spirit upon the gathered crowd and a sound like a rushing wind filled the room. Inspired by this event, several of the disciples began speaking in languages that were foreign to them, but not foreign to the listeners. For the first time, many in the crowd heard God's words for their lives.

Luke describes the Spirit's entrance into the house as a rushing violent wind. It filled the entire house so that no space escaped its occupation. The sound of the wind changed into the appearance of tongues of fire. And all who saw and heard it were amazed and perplexed to witness the spirit of God come into their midst. This same spirit enabled the people to speak plainly to the variety of people gathered together, though some were understandably confused. It was clear evidence that God yearns to speak everyone's language so all can understand.

Peter assumed the role of translator, speaking plainly to the crowd, telling them that what they were witnessing was what the prophet Joel foretold: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams..."

The Spirit came to them in languages they could understand. God continued to bring incarnation to earth.

It's as if God was saying, long after the death and resurrection of Jesus: Can you hear me now?

I was on a plane several years ago. I was tired and not looking forward to the trip. I tend to have more troubles with motion sickness when I'm tired, so I was looking forward to reading a book to distract me through the liftoff portion and then taking a nap before the beverage cart came through.

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Unfortunately the book I chose to distract me during takeoff was a religious book, I can't remember the title, but the friendly man next to me decided to strike up a conversation. "Is it a good book?" he asked. "Yes." I replied. "Very good," hoping that this brief answer would give him the hint that I wanted to get back to the book. He didn't take the hint.

"So what's it about?" he asked, congenially. I explained to him a bit of the thesis of the book, again speaking politely yet succinctly so I could get back to my book. By this time the airplane's engines were beginning to roar.

"What made you read it?" he continued and it became clear to me that he wasn't going to give up. This is the moment that most pastors dread. The choices are by-and-large twofold—you can either try to continue to evade entering into a full blown conversation by giving short yet polite answers or you can tell them that you are a pastor and the reason that you're reading the book is so that you can explicate the divine hermeneutic in the interaction of life and faith. The problem is that once you disclose your vocation, you often open a wide door that people walk through with either their personal problems, coming to you as a confessor, or with their objections to the institutional church. This man had objections.

"Don't take this the wrong way," he said, "but I'm spiritual not religious."

"Oh really," I said, trying not to sound too interested or too bored with a statement I had heard dozens of times before.

"Yah," he said, "I used to go to church, but I don't any more. Any time I want to feel close to God, I just go for a walk in nature or watch a beautiful sunset."

'Really,' I wanted to say. 'Thanks for telling me that you can find God in nature. I never would have thought of that myself. We Christians think that God is only in our church buildings and nowhere else. God in nature—imagine that!'

I wanted to say, as the man continued explaining how he was a very spiritual man, that it is true that God can be seen and heard in nature and even (as he was telling me then) in small children's cute and inspiring sayings. But can you see and hear God in the woman who has just found out she has breast cancer? Can you hear God crying along with the man who has been laid off from his job just before his 25th year with the company, the 25th year when a higher level of pension benefits and vacation benefits and medical benefits kicks in? Can you hear God protesting when another member of God's family is discriminated against because of age or race or sexual orientation?

God is still speaking, "Can you hear me now?"

As I got off the plane after conversing with this spiritual but not religious person, it wasn't until I got over my irritation with his interrupting my perfect plan for a perfect flight that I realized that maybe God was speaking to me through that man. Maybe God was

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trying to show me what, frankly, a majority of people in the United States are thinking, that religion is good for some people but not for them, that faith is something they feel gets them through the day but not into the doors of a food shelf or onto the site of a Habitat for Humanity house or into the doors of a church. I began to wonder, in what ways can I see this man and that conversation as a gift from God?

The Holy Spirit often works this way—through interruptions and annoyances, at least that's how it happens in much of my life and, I suspect, in the lives of others. Do you imagine that the virgin Mary wasn't annoyed even a little bit when the Holy Spirit appeared to her and gave her the news of her impending pregnancy? Can you imagine that Joshua was thrilled to learn that God's plan for the destruction of Jericho was not through force or military superiority, but through the army of Israel waltzing around the outside of the city day after day after day after day after day?

God is still speaking. Can you hear it?

God is still speaking through worship and song, through conversation and prayer, through friendships and new experiences, the Holy Spirit makes us breathe deeply of the gift of life, the gift of God's presence and guidance and support. When we pray 'come Holy Spirit' we fill our lungs with the breath of new life and expect God to show up.

We are a Pentecost People, listening for the sound of the Holy Spirit coming into our lives and breathing deeply of its inspiration.

God is still speaking, but as I said last week, God may need some interpretation, some people who are willing to help others to hear the words and the word of God for their lives.

One preacher by the name of David Lose, from Luther Seminary, created a video about Pentecost. The video says:

Go ahead admit it you're wondering about the future, maybe even worrying: Do we even have a future? Will our church survive? Will our children have faith? Will our faith have children?

There are so many challenges: money, divisions, arguments. We're getting older. How are we going to pay the bills? We don't know the people next door anymore. Why would they want to come to our church? People pass by. We don't know them. No one comes in. They are outside. We are inside.

And so we wait and watch and worry. But we don't know what to do. Won't someone come and help us? These are big questions. But you are not the first to ask them. Did you know there's a story in the Bible that is exactly like this? Do you remember?

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There are only a few left. People pass by outside. They are inside—waiting, watching and they don't know what to do. And then it happens: wind, fire, noise and silence. What just happened?

No one came and took away their problems. Instead, the Spirit comes and creates a new one. That's right, the Holy Spirit shows up and creates a problem. They can't stay inside. They have to go out and preach, and serve, and care, and witness, and teach and pray and love and invite. They just can't help it. It was Pentecost.

So, I've got bad news and good news. The bad news is there is no one coming to fix your problems. The good news is, the solutions you seek are all around you. You have strength and courage and compassion and a story to tell.

Our problem isn't money or divisions or arguments. Our problem is we've got a story to tell and we can't help but tell it.

Now imagine one person reaching out to another and then another and another to tell, to share, to listen, to love, to be, to hold, to feed, to preach, to listen. Why? Because we can't help it. It's Pentecost.

God is still speaking. Can you hear it? Can you share it?

Our job is to partner with God's work wherever we can see it or hear it. We are called to see God in the neighbor whose leaves litter our lawn every fall and to hear God's cry for help from the friend going through a divorce. We are sent to give a welcoming hug to those who come back from the front lines of war and to cry with the families of those whose loved ones are never going to come back.

God is still speaking. Can you hear it?

Let us pray (a prayer by William Willimon) Come Holy Spirit, "Blow upon us...Help us to hear, amid all the conflicting voices that speak to us, the risen Christ. Help us to speak, amid all the difficulty of finding the right words, to the God who has so graciously in Christ spoken to us. Speak to us, that we might speak to you. Amen."